

# McDonnell Douglas Ignores Health Hazards, Workers Charge

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Four workers at a McDonnell Aircraft Co. plant here say they are being exposed to the potential health hazard of asbestos, as well as to fumes and spills from vats of boiling acids and chemicals.

The employees at Building 27 — the company's largest parts manufacturing plant — have sought help from the office of Sen. John C. Danforth, R-Mo. They say company officials refuse to acknowledge any safety problems.

The aircraft company is part of the McDonnell Douglas Corp.

John W. Menefee, a machine repairman, says that with the help of dozens of other workers, he has compiled a list of about 50 safety problems. The list — signed by Menefee and co-workers Butch Hughes, Glenn Spruell and Don McMaster — was presented earlier this week to company officials.

McDonnell officials say they have a good record on safety and occupational health issues.

Spokesman Raymond A. Deffry said the company planned to investigate the complaints, but he would not discuss specifics.

The four workers who came forward with the complaints say they were spurred by health concerns and don't want to be branded as troublemakers. Menefee, who has worked at the plant for about a year, said, "When I told my supervisors about the problems, they told me that I should be worried about my job, not asbestos." He said he and others had complained repeatedly to his union safety representative but had got no action.

Deffry said Menefee had been suspended recently for operating machinery carelessly.

District 837 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers represents about 10,000 McDonnell employees. The district's president, Cassell Williams, said he was unaware of any potential health hazards at the plant.

The list of complaints alleges that asbestos, used to insulate the steam

pipes on the ceiling, has burst out of its protective casing in places and is also present in bathrooms, heating ducts and other sites. Exposure to asbestos can cause cancer.

Many of the other complaints involve tanks of acids — used to etch metal — and degreasing solvents at the plant. Workers contend that the plant's exhaust systems function poorly. They say an acid mist from the tanks pervades the work area, causing nosebleeds, smarting eyes, headaches and sinus problems.

They also say spills from the tanks have been common. The acid and other substances are allowed to wash down storm sewers, they say.

Menefee said he had constant nosebleeds and coughed up mucus. "If you happen to walk by and the wind is blowing the right way, it will about knock you to your knees," he said.

But Deffrey, the McDonnell spokesman, said past inspections by the company's safety division had revealed no problems. He said the workers were not giving "the system"

at the company a chance to work. No written complaint has been filed through channels, he said.

Anne Forry, a senior attorney at McDonnell, said the company is "dedicated to environmental compliance and beyond that." She said that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Agency probably would conduct an investigation, too.

A spokesman Mr. Danforth said that his staff here had expressed its concern to McDonnell officials and planned to keep tabs on any investigation.

Denver Holt, an industrial hygienist and supervisor in OSHA's health division here, said he had investigated sporadic complaints at Building 27 in the past but had never conducted a complete safety inspection. Holt said OSHA officials had been at the plant last year to investigate a complaint about noise. That complaint was unsubstantiated.

Workers at Building 27 said OSHA had indicated that it could be weeks before the agency would inspect the

plant. Menefee said no written complaint had been filed because it must be filed by his supervisors, who were unwilling to do so.

Each of the employees who complained had his own litany of health problems and safety concerns.

Spruell, a pipefitter at McDonnell for 20 years, said he had knots all over his body and breathing difficulties, as well as uncontrollable twitching and jerking.

"I like my job and the company and the benefits, but some of the things that go on are intolerable," he said. "We're crying for help."

Spruell said he once was knocked unconscious from toxic fumes while cleaning a vat containing remnants of cleaning solvents.

"I blacked out for 45 minutes," he said. "I know that there are special safety procedures for cleaning out vats like that — but two years later, I'm still trying to get them from my supervisor."

McMaster, a machine repairman, said constant problems with bearings and other parts on machines attested

to the seriousness of the acid fumes problem.

"The bearings just get eaten away, or a brown rusty stuff gets on them," he said. "It makes you wonder what they (the vapors) do to people."

Ms. Forry said the company was looking into the Spruell incident. She said the company frequently conducted air samplings and tests for other potential hazards such as asbestos.

A health and safety official at McDonnell says that protective clothing and respirators are available for workers who clean or fill the vats and that supervisors are responsible for deciding when they are needed.

McMaster, who has worked at the plant for three years, said he was concerned about the high levels of dust and particles in the air from cutting metal parts. He said particles of metal had irritated his eyes and had become lodged in his skin.

"I went to the nurse, and she told me that they would gradually work their way out," he said.

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